

Gorbachev's Power Wider, But Not His Legitimacy

Lithuania Typifies New President's Problems

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, March 31—The secession crisis in Lithuania has encapsulated the basic problem facing Mikhail Gorbachev in his new position as the Soviet Union's first executive president. Political power is not the same thing as popular legitimacy.

On paper, Gorbachev's powers are impressive. As head of state, general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and supreme commander of the Soviet armed forces, he controls all the principal levers of authority in the world's second superpower. Instruments at his disposal include the KGB security police, a vast propaganda apparatus and a state bureaucracy whose tentacles extend to the most remote reaches of the Soviet Union.

In the past two weeks, Gorbachev has used his presidential powers to prevent Lithuania from implementing its March 11 proclamation of independence. He has sent 20 Soviet army units to the rebel Baltic republic to occupy public buildings, arrest Lithuanian deserters from the Soviet army and replace the chief law enforcement officer of the new Lithuanian government.

And yet, when compared with the authority of a U.S. president or a British prime minister, the power of the Soviet leader seems curiously fragile. He has ordered soldiers onto the streets of Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, but he cannot convince Lithuanians that they should remain citizens of the Soviet Union. He has talked incessantly about *perestroika*, or economic restructuring, but is unable to persuade ordinary Soviets to work harder when there is nothing to buy in the stores.

In Western countries, the vast majority of citizens tacitly agree to a basic set of political and economic ground rules. In the Soviet Union, which was founded on the ideology of "class struggle" and the "dictatorship of the proletariat," no such voluntary national consensus exists. Soviet leaders have traditionally imposed their will by force. As soon as a leader comes along who rules out the use of force, his authority is automatically challenged.

NEWS
ANALYSIS

The crisis of political legitimacy is compounded by the fact that neither Gorbachev, nor any member of his inner circle, has ever faced real voters. Gorbachev was chosen general secretary in March 1985 by a cabal of Communist party leaders following the death of Konstantin Chernenko. He was "elected" to the Congress of People's Deputies on a special Communist Party list. When the congress elected him president of the Soviet Union, there were no other candidates on the ballot.

In the short term, Gorbachev clearly has the power to tighten the screws in Lithuania or any other part of the Soviet Union. His strategy toward Vilnius—the piecemeal reassertion of Soviet authority—has resembled the "salami tactics" used by Matyas Rakosi to impose Communist Party rule on Hungary after World War II. It consists of slicing away little pieces of your opponent's salami until the entire sausage has disappeared.

Over the longer term, however, the eventual secession of Lithuania now seems highly probable. The only way it could be stopped would be through a crackdown so massive that it would destroy any hope of turning the Soviet Union into a modern post-industrial state. Once the Kremlin renounced the use of force as a political weapon, it became very difficult to justify the forcible annexation of the Baltic states in 1940 under a secret agreement with Nazi Germany. Under the circumstances, Gorbachev's dream of transforming the Soviet Union into a confederation of sovereign states seems utopian.

The present trial of strength over Lithuania could turn out to be a dress rehearsal for the coming battle over the future of the Soviet economy. Gorbachev is likely to be faced with an even greater test of his political legitimacy as he attempts to dismantle the system of central planning and subsidized prices in favor of a free market.

In theory, the new presidential institutions have been designed to give Gorbachev the authority to break down bureaucratic resistance to economic reform. In practice, his biggest problem is not the lack of administrative power. It is the widespread popular mistrust of official promises together with the painful economic fact that living conditions will have to get worse before they can get better.

After 70 years of socialism, Soviet citizens have reached a cynical social contract with the authorities: "You pretend to pay us and we pretend to work." The advantage of this arrangement is that prices are subsidized by the state, which also guarantees virtually full employment and basic social benefits. The downside is the lack of individual initiative and flexibility in the economy.

Any transition to a market economy is bound to be painful in the

short term as state subsidies are phased out. For a government that lacks popular legitimacy, the transition phase is also politically extremely dangerous. Cuts in living standards or in the purchasing power of the ruble could result in a popular explosion.

Addressing the first session of his presidential council this week, Gorbachev said that radical economic reform is now his number one priority. He acknowledged that the government's latest reform package—which was adopted with much fanfare less than four months ago—is not working. The answer, he said, was "a controlled transition to market relations," including a "reorganized pricing system."

The composition of the 16-man presidential council suggests that Gorbachev is very concerned about a popular backlash against his reform plans. Members include Veniamin Yarin, a conservative trade unionist who has campaigned vociferously against economic liberalization on the grounds that it could damage "workers' interests."

By co-opting hard-liners onto his main advisory body, the Soviet president is clearly trying to protect his political flank. The danger is that he could fatally undermine the effectiveness of the new reform program if he

makes too many compromises with populist and demagogic forces.

Time is running out. According to official government figures, industrial production fell in January and February of this year for the first time since World War II. At the same time, the cash income of the population has been growing by more than 15 percent a year. Some Western economists estimate that the Soviet Union's national income has been declining for the last two or three years.

"There is no painless method of moving from one economic system to another. Society must pay a fairly high price for this. If we had accomplished this transition two or three years ago, the price would have been less. The longer we postpone it, the higher the price is going to be," said Deputy Prime Minister Leonid Abalkin.